



## ***Member Care Update***

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### **MEMBER CARE: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY**

By Neal Pirolo: [www.eri.org](http://www.eri.org)

A number of years ago, I wrote an article entitled, *The Great Divorce*. It should have been titled, *A Painful Reconciliation*. In allegorical form, it spoke of a Church divorcing itself from the Command Jesus had given it: "Go! Into all of the world" in 1793 when William Carey was rebuked for his passion for the lost with the words, "If God wants to save the heathen, He'll do it without your help or ours."

In the article, I quickly fast-forwarded to the present Church which is saying, "We were wrong. We want to—we need to—reengage in the mission's process." This statement of repentance is received with reluctance by mission agencies. Like a 'faithful spouse,' agencies are struggling to let the church partner with them in the mission endeavor. Agencies ask the churches, "What would you do? Where would you fit in? Where were you when we needed you? We set up structures to accommodate your leaving. Now, you lack experience. And, furthermore, I'm not sure we can (or want to) relinquish anything to you!"

As I survey the missions process from the awakening of the Christian community to "lift up their eyes" to the needs of the lost all the way through to the retirement of a missionary, I conclude there is no better place for the Church to reengage in the missions process than in the ongoing care of their missionaries.

Most agencies, in the absence of the Church, have established structures of care for their members. The task is enormous! Many agencies are putting considerable time and energy into providing care for their members, even, in some agencies, designating whole departments to the business of Member Care. Unfortunately, such care can prove to be woefully inadequate, as reflected in the personnel/practices of three types of struggling member care departments I have observed: *out of touch*, *personnel-challenged*, and *burned-out*.

### **THE DILEMMA**

**Out of touch** Shortly after *Serving as Senders*, a book on Church Level Member Care, was published, I was given the opportunity to share its concepts with the Director of Member Care of a rather large mission agency. Members of his department had referred the book to him, say, "It would certainly be an asset for our missionaries." After setting three appointments to meet with me, he still hadn't read the book. We agreed to meet, anyway.

Now, my concern was how I would succinctly present the thesis of this book to the director. I decided to give a brief overview of the six areas of care (see them listed in the resources below) and then tell the story of Beth, a lady who struggled through several months of reentry stress without finding help! Finally, in a desperate appeal, she again approached her pastor one Sunday. Admittedly, her timing wasn't the best, but his reply, "Beth, I am busy! But if you must, call and set an appointment for a week from next Wednesday," was very disappointing to

her. With her pastor's response, Beth "realized" she wasn't worth anybody's time. She went home and swallowed a bottle of Valium! By God's grace and a roommate's sensitivity to the Spirit's leading, Beth was found and taken to the hospital. That day she recovered—physically. It took several years to help her realize life was worth living.

This true story is a bit dramatic, for sure. It doesn't represent the conclusion of most reentry stories. I was certain, though, that this Director of Member Care would be aware of the seriousness of the issues missionaries face on the field or when they come home. But, his response struck me with almost as much impact as Beth's pastor's had on her. "Neal, this sort of thing doesn't really happen!"

What should I say? What *could* I say? This Director of Member Care was obviously not in touch with the reality of reentry. I mumbled a few words about what a great work his organization was doing, and in moments, the appointment was over. The irony? Months later, I learned that a lady from that organization had succeeded in committing suicide just months prior to our appointment.

**Personnel Challenged** The reentry time in the life of a missionary remains shrouded in ignorance. I believe the mission agency is more aware of the problems of reentry than the Church, but personnel-challenged as they usually are, agencies often do not have the staff to deal with reentry issues. One regional office of a large agency, after a tragic suicide of a returned missionary, established a tremendous program of education in the churches. But as personnel were reassigned or retired, the program "died" (no pun intended). "It probably will not be revived until another tragedy awakens the agency to the vital need for care-giving during this critical time," a reassigned person told me.

**Burned out** At a recent conference, I was assigned to the Member Care Track. A very sincere, well-experienced worker, who displayed every sign of near burn-out, expressed a rat race level of frantic running from one critical location to another, trying to deal with overwhelming issues missionaries were facing. It was as if this person was a fireman, trying to control a forest fire with a garden hose. Thus burdened, Agency Level Member Care personnel certainly have no energy to deal with the smoldering issues, which would have been eliminated (or greatly minimized) with a good "fire prevention program" of Church Level Member Care.

Mission agencies, by all standards of measure, are struggling in the area of member care. And unfortunately, the Church is basically ignorant of the issues missionaries face. Believing the myth that once missionaries join an agency, they belong to the agency, the Church often wipes its hands of any responsibility toward their members. This posture of ignorance, along with the agency's difficulty in handling problems, yields a deplorable result of struggling missionaries plowing through to retirement or quitting in frustration, anger or despair. Is there a solution?

## THE WAY FORWARD

**Agency-Initiated Reconciliation** It was my privilege to speak about Church Level Member Care to a group of missionary candidates. Their agency had brought the senior pastor of each candidate's sending church to join them for this training. With the foresight and wisdom, this agency established a division specifically for the purpose of reengaging the Church in their mission process. They chose the critical area of member care as their starting point. They see this as the first and best place for the Church to get involved. In a session with just the pastors, we came to grips with what would have to change in their church structure to take on the primary care of their missionaries. I would not let them say, "It won't work in my church!" We grappled with the issues of how to *make it work* in each church.

**Church-Initiated Reconciliation** A pastor served on the Board of a mission agency. While at one of their meetings, the board received their custom edition of *Serving as Senders*. Though his drive home was long into the dark of night, he had finished reading the book on his arrival at home. (Not recommended, by the way—to read a book while driving!) Back at his church, he had his secretary type a letter of resignation for each of the Mission Committee members. He called a meeting where he handed each one their Letter of Resignation and told them to sign it. Not sure what was going on, yet understanding the dramatic bent in their pastor, they each signed their letter. "Now tear it up," he said. "This is to let you know that we are not 'doing missions' the same way anymore."

Then, he laid out the basic concepts of the book. Years later, I was invited to do a “turbo-charged” seminar for the twenty-one Quest Teams, the name they had given to the people who had prayerfully committed to the team leadership of their twenty-one missionary families.

**Reconciliation: It *Must* Happen** Mission agencies and the Church must take steps, as painful as they may be, toward reconciliation. I believe the best place to begin is with member care. Whether it is initiated by the agency or by the Church, learning to work together *must* take place. And both *must* actively participate.

- Agencies must relinquish their attempts at providing the total care package. This begins by them being honest about the number of hurting members in their agency.
- Agencies must rewrite their Policy Handbook to require the missionary to have a church level care team, functioning in all six areas, *before* he departs for the field.
- Agencies must maintain alertness to field related needs of their missionaries and engage the Church in the solutions.
- Churches must begin developing the team concept, including those who go and those who serve as senders.
- Churches must not allow their members to leave until they have a functioning support team, no matter how “desperately” they may be needed on the field.
- Churches must provide a dual commissioning service, holding the missionaries accountable to the task to which they have committed *and* the Church and the specific support team to affirm their commitment to the tasks to which they have pledged.

With a deep breath of commitment, these are starting points at reconciliation. May God give us the wisdom, understanding *and* grace to begin taking these steps.

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## Resources

**The six areas of missionary care** addressed by Paul in Philippians

Moral Support—the Gift of Encouragement: The Whole Letter! He is UP!

Prayer Support—the Gift of Intercession: Phil 1:14-19

Reentry Support—the Gifts of Hospitality and Discernment: Phil 1:22-26; 2:28-29

Financial Support—the Gift of Giving: Phil 4:10-19

Communication Support—the Gifts of Discernment and Encouragement: Phil 2:23

Logistics Support—the Gift of Administration: Phil 2:19, 25

*Serving As Senders*, 1991 Review by Serving for HIM "Dawn", February 6, 2010: Incredible Book! It takes lots of different resources and seems to pull them all together to make one great read. It would be helpful for ANYONE who is interested in missions. I read it as a missionary who is trying to "teach" her small church how to do missions (from the field) and to remind the church that out of sight shouldn't be out of mind. Also realizing where everyone (including myself) has failed at doing this the right way. Yet it is giving hope that things can be turned around. This is a very good resource. It gives examples of what each "team" member needs to be doing, and how it all affects those missionaries on the field; before, during and after their term of service. I would recommend this book to every member of a church who wants to be mission minded! I wish I had cases of these to give out!

*Doing Member Care Well*, Edited by Kelly O'Donnell

*Too Valuable To Lose*, Edited by William D. Taylor

*The Reentry Team: Caring For Your Returning Missionaries*, 2000. Reviewed by C. Randell "Tina", August 21, 2009, “This is an excellent tool for Mission Committees and supportive individuals for missionaries.

[For] too long, most of us have been in ignorance over the needs of our returning missionaries. After reading this book, your eyes will be opened to the needs and how to help meet those needs. It is a highly motivating book.”

*The Art of Coming Home*, Craig Storti

*Re-Entry*, Peter Jordan

*Burn Up or Splash Down*, Marion Knell